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UNCLAS JOHANNESBURG 000195

DEPT FOR CA/ACS/AF FOR ELIZABETH GRACON, CHIEF VOTING ACTION OFFICER

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CASC](#) [CMGT](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA: ELECTION EXCITEMENT AMONG VOTERS AND
NON-VOTERS

REF: 7 FAM 1551

¶1. SUMMARY. Post observed a high, perhaps even unprecedented, level of participation among the American electorate living in South Africa during the 2007/2008 election cycle. Election interest extended beyond the American electorate to international media, foreign expatriates, and the general South African population. Post estimates direct assistance to at least 1,000 Amcit voters, and we disseminated messages promoting election participation to hundreds more through radio announcements, warden messages, and announcements on the Mission's website. The Democrats Abroad organization was active in South Africa, hosting voter registration drives and featuring prominently in South Africa's media. END SUMMARY.

Post Assists About 1,000 Potential Amcit Voters

¶2. Post assisted approximately 1,000 Amcits during the 2008 election cycle. Post helped voters access and return about 200 Federal Post Card Applications (FPCAs) and about 200 Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots. Assistance to other Amcit voters ran the gamut from providing advice on state-by-state regulations to explaining options for the return of voted ballots. During Absentee Voting Week, Post set-up a drop box for voted ballots at the public entrance of the Consulate and routinely referred voters to the special FedEx rate for couriering completed ballots to the U.S. if voters were trying to return their ballots within two weeks of November 4, 2008.

¶3. Amcit voters contacted the Consulate for assistance via email and phone and by walking into our waiting room during regular ACS business hours. According to Post's two ACS LES, this was the busiest election season they had ever observed. Both LES have served in the ACS section for more than 12 years (at least three presidential election cycles).

Outreach: From Voting Drives to Radio Shows

¶4. To promote voter awareness and participation, post undertook a range of outreach activities. Three of the major highlights were:

- On Consular Leadership Day in January 2008, the VAO provided voting information to the Mission's five USG agencies to ensure USG employees had registered overseas and were equipped to participate.
- On February 22, 2008, the VAO held a voter registration drive at the American Society's annual reception. Approximately 75 Amcits attended the reception; at least 25 people completed FPCAs and more than 40 Amcits obtained voting information.
- On July 5, 2008, the VAO set-up a voter registration tent at the American community's annual July 4th celebration, which more than 200 people attended. Approximately 50 Amcits completed FPCAs during the event and 100 other prospective voters took Post's notices on how to register absentee, state-by-state deadlines, South Africa's toll-free helpline, etc.

¶5. To provide the latest voting information to Amcit voters registered with the Consulate, post sent warden messages regarding key dates and about events such as Absentee Voting

Week. Post posted regular announcements on the Mission's website, poster displays in the Consulate waiting area, and notices published in the American Society's newsletters and through a well-known website for expatriates living in South Africa (www.xpat.co.za).

¶16. To reach potential voters not necessarily registered with the U.S. Mission, Post leveraged Johannesburg's most popular talk radio show (FM 702). Collaborating with our Public Affairs Office, consular staff recorded a one minute public announcement about Absentee Voting Week and participated in a thirty-minute radio interview to inform voters about how to access FWABs, where to find state-by-state voting guidance (www.fvap.gov), and options for mailing voted ballots to the U.S. During Absentee Voting Week, the Consul General also participated in an interview on one of South Africa's top music stations (Five FM) discussing the election and encouraging all Amcits living in South Africa to make their voices heard.

FVAP Voting Workshop Via DVC

¶17. In December 2007, Post hosted a FVAP workshop via DVC with the Consulates General in Cape Town and Durban. Post's ACS staff gained valuable information regarding correct registration procedures and the wealth of information available through the FVAP website. All those who attended agreed that the DVC proved extremely beneficial throughout election season. Notices from Consular Affairs and the Voting Info Newsletters were also very helpful to Post.

Democrats Abroad: An Active Player in South Africa

¶18. The organization Democrats Abroad played an active role in South Africa, especially in the Johannesburg area. Democrats Abroad promoted voter registration, hosting three voter registration drives (two in Johannesburg and one in Pretoria) and private house parties also known as "rallies." According to the head of Democrats Abroad, Courtney Priester, the organization helped approximately 750 potential Amcits register to vote absentee. Of these 750 voters, Priester estimated that 250 had never voted before, did not know where they were registered to vote, or were unsure if they had ever registered to vote previously. Democrats Abroad also estimated that it assisted approximately 125 voters with the return of their voted ballots to the U.S.

¶19. Democrats Abroad received significant press. "There was a great deal of interest from South Africa's media in this election," Priester said. He estimated that he participated in at least 10 different television interviews prior to the election on channels such as SABC International, ENews, and News

¶24. While his evidence is anecdotal, Priester remarked that interest from the South African media and public could not be compared to 2004. "There was huge interest in the election not only among Americans living in South Africa but among South Africans generally. Like trends across America, I think more Amcits living in South Africa voted in this election than in past elections," he told the VAO on December 3, 2008. To Post's knowledge, there is not an active organization with Republican representation in South Africa.

Lessons Learned

¶10. Numerous voters were under the impression that they needed to come to the Consulate in person to complete voter registration forms and the voted ballot. Post needs to emphasize in all of its online announcements and warden messages that Amcits can access FPCAs and FWABs through www.fvap.gov and do not need to make a special trip into the Consulate to obtain these resources.

¶11. Approximately 20-30 Amcits complained to the Consulate that they had attempted to register absentee (they had sent in their FPCAs) but never received voting materials or confirmation of registration. During the next election cycle, the Consulate should tailor messages in its newsletter and online

announcements to address such issues. Post needs to emphasize that voters should not wait more than 1-2 months for confirmation of absentee registration and urge voters to contact their local board of elections or a voting assistant with FVAP (through the toll free number) to seek specific advice regarding their registration.

Press Coverage

¶12. As mentioned above, Post's voter outreach received coverage on Johannesburg's "Talk Radio 702" and "Five FM" radio station. An article in the Mail & Guardian newspaper and a radio interview with Agence France-Presse also covered Post's voting promotion efforts.

¶13. COMMENT: Post witnessed significant election excitement not only among potential Amcit voters but also among non-voters, including members of the media and South African residents in Johannesburg. Post received numerous inquiries from first-time voters and voters who had not voted in recent elections. While much of the evidence is anecdotal, it appears that the American electorate in South Africa was similar to the American electorate in America; voters were engaged and enthusiastic and turning out in higher numbers than in 2004 and 2000. END COMMENT.

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